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THE FUNCTION
AND ORGANIZATION OF
UNIVERSITY PRESSES

An address by
George Parmly Day

November 6, 1914



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THE FUNCTION AND ORGANIZATION OF UNIVERSITY PRESSES

BY

GEORGE PARMLY DAY

President of the Yale University Press

Years ago when there was admittedly much force in the jibe that "a university press was an organization whose function was to publish works which no one would read," there was, quite naturally, as little general interest in its organization as there was in its function. Today, when the various associations affiliated with many of our American universities under the general title of university presses have fairly challenged attention everywhere by the results of their activities, there is very general interest not only in their purpose but also in the efficiency of the methods by which they seek to achieve this purpose. The question of their organization may have been, and frequently was, at their inception merely an

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academic question in more than one sense: and was solved by each university as the occasion arose without much reference as to what other institutions had done. As a result of this we naturally find that the form of organization was determined in each case by local conditions—such as the traditions, needs, opportunities and even the location of each university. The conditions making for the establishment of a press at one of our universities were almost certain to be entirely different from those prevailing at another institution, which, nevertheless, felt the need of an organization of somewhat similar character. At some of our universities, for example, the first development was a printing plant for the manufacture of catalogues, reports and other documents. At others the university press came into being in reponse to a demand for a publishing house closely affiliated with the university, and concerned, at the start at least,

with the work of publication almost to the exclusion of manufacturing. It is rather fortunate both for those interested in our existing university presses and for those who may be planning for others yet to be established that the development has been along these different lines, since much of value can be learned from even a brief survey of the methods followed by each press and of the conditions which made these most desirable.

Perhaps the best example of how a single factor may determine the character of the activities of a university press is the monopoly enjoyed by Oxford and Cambridge of printing in England the revised version of the Bible and the Church of England prayer-book. This monopoly necessitates at each institution a thoroughly equipped printing plant: the profit from it permits each institution to publish generously works of scholarship almost regardless

of financial loss. In America some of our university presses, while formed as printing plants, were enabled to proceed almost at once with the work of publication, because of the far-sighted generosity of friends in providing them with endowment funds. This represents perhaps the ideal organization for an American university press, since, while its printing plant may return a profit, its publishing business should not and cannot fairly be expected to do so. The arrangement seems still more ideal when it is considered that such a press with a printing plant of its own not burdened with large fixed charges can, and ought to, manufacture books of the most distinguished format. But although this combination leaves little to be desired from either the æsthetic or financial point of view, it is not necessary for every university to wait for such a winning combination before establishing its press.

As a rule the choice must be made at the start whether a particular press is to be a printing establishment or a publishing house. If the choice has to be made by a university more or less remote from a city and the typographical facilities offered there, and unable for this reason to secure satisfactory printing of its documents except at great inconvenience and at large cost, then the need is obviously for a printing plant. This plant, however, if it is to deserve the title of university press, must be scrupulously careful to follow the very best traditions of printing and of book-binding: to set a standard, or, in other words, to be educational in its work. It is not enough that it should save the university money or that it should prove itself a financial success. For it is really capable of greater service than this, and should be seeking constantly how to broaden its field of service. As an example

of what can be done in this direction may be mentioned the course followed by a printing plant at one of the western state universities. There to the work of routine printing for the institution has been added the prompt preparation and issue of monographs embodying the results of research by members of the faculty. These pamphlets—for they are often little more than that in form—may or may not presage the entrance of that university into the field of general publication, but they are immensely valuable to workers in other institutions and therefore make of a local printing plant an establishment whose activities are of such widespread interest as to warrant it in using the title of university press.

Where the initial choice between printing and publishing has to be made by a university situated in or near a city, different considerations almost necessarily lead to the founding of its university

press as a publishing house. In the case of an institution thus located it is probable that the routine printing of catalogues and other pamphlets has been satisfactorily attended to for many years by local concerns; that because of the amount of such work which a large university can place each year the charges have been kept low through competitive bidding; and that the standard of printing has remained high if the university has recognized the influence it can properly exert to this end. Under such conditions it may quite fairly be urged that the establishment of a university printing plant is perhaps in large part a needless duplication of existing facilities, and that the real need of the institution is for a publishing house. It may be argued also that in such a community the establishment of a printing plant by a tax-exempt university to compete with tax-paying printers of the town is not

only unnecessary, but unwise, since it would seem to indicate that the university is intent on seeking its own advantage rather than the good of the community. As a result it will probably be found best to respond to the immediate and greater need for a publishing house, and to allow the possibility of a printing plant to remain merely an attractive possibility until it becomes a necessity. There will be influences gradually working toward this, such as the inability of commercial printers to provide rare types for very occasional use. Whether or not such influences will ultimately force a university press, established in a community of the kind just described, to add the work of printing to its business of publishing will depend upon its willingness and ability to cooperate with printing concerns already existing. If it recognizes that it can broaden its field of service by setting and maintaining

a high standard of manufacture in its publications; if it seeks to have these equal in excellence of typography and general appearance the best volumes issued by commercial publishing houses, or even by universities which have their own printing plants; if it endeavors, as it should, to develop in the university where it is located a love for fine printing as well as a desire for the best in books, close co-operation with one or more printing concerns is essential. From association it is not at all impossible that the university may eventually find itself with its own printing plant, the early co-operation tending towards a definite closer alliance between the university press and the printer, and the alliance later developing into a merging of the printing plant with the publishing house without surprise or objection on the part of the community. Meanwhile if its work of publishing shall have been well done the uni-

versity press of this type will have used its opportunities and resources to much greater advantage than if it had begun its career as a printing plant.

The influence that questions connected with taxation may exert in determining whether or not a university shall operate a printing plant will play a part also in determining whether a given university shall constitute its press as a department of the institution or prefer that it shall be a separate organization, affiliated with the university but not owned by it. In so far as the average man within or without the university community is concerned the result is the same in either event—for the title, university press, identifies the organization absolutely with the seat of learning whose name it bears. There is, however, in many localities at least, an advantage to the university in making it plain to the city authorities that the institution itself is not

seeking either to engage in the supposedly profitable work of printing or to enter the admittedly unremunerative field of publishing properly open to it: since there is a dislike on the part of many to have universities embarking in so-called business enterprises. Where no such feeling exists, it would perhaps be natural for a university to organize its press as an integral department of the institution. Where there is, or may be, feeling of the kind indicated, it is the part of wisdom for the university to favor or consent to the formation of its press, under an agreement with the university, as a separate organization, which shall make annual reports as to its business, etc., to the city, state and federal authorities exactly as other corporations are required to do by law, and pay such taxes as may be assessed against it. In this case the agreement suggested should be such as will absolutely safeguard the in-

terests of the university, in view of the fact that it is lending both its name and prestige to an enterprise which has it in its power to misrepresent the institution as well as to represent it. Care should be taken, for example, to provide that the officers of the press and the general conduct of its business shall always be acceptable to the university. Provision should be made for the university to take over the business, if later this course appeals to it, without payment for good will. Meanwhile the university must be free to withdraw the permission granted for the use of its name in the title of the press. Above all, it should be understood that no works are to be published by the press without the consent of the university authorities. The importance of this particular provision is emphasized because there is the greatest opportunity for misunderstanding here unless some definite form of procedure be

agreed upon in advance. The organizers of such a press would not wish to bring discredit upon their university, but through mistaken enthusiasm might easily place it in an unfortunate position by the publication of a single ill-chosen work. If, however, all manuscripts must be approved by a faculty committee appointed by the university this possibility of friction is eliminated. The founders of such a press would naturally consent freely to such a proviso because of their recognition of their responsibility to the university. In return they have a right to expect a proper recognition by the university of its responsibility to the press, which should be free to cover a wide field, and to publish any scholarly, well-written work however greatly its conclusions may differ from those of the faculty committee.

In some of our American universities we have then direct operation of the press by the uni-

versity as one of its own departments. In others we find the press a separate organization controlled, but not managed, by the institution. In one of our universities where the press has taken the form of a publishing house the organization is described as a private corporation related directly to the university by the provision that its trustees must always be officers of the university, and that the president of the university shall be the president of the press. Here we have apparently as great a degree of control as if the press were a department of the university. At other universities the officers and trustees of the presses are alumni, perhaps not otherwise identified with the institutions concerned. Presumably each university is satisfied with its own arrangements, but because of the fact that outsiders may regard as curious the idea of a university press organized and conducted by those who

are not necessarily either officers or teachers in the institution, it may be worth while to consider what advantages such a plan presents. That there are possible disadvantages may be admitted: although none which by the exercise of due care on the part of the university may not be overcome.

It is, however, necessary for the latter to do more than merely seek to safeguard its name and reputation by means of an agreement, such as has been suggested, which shall make clear for all time the duty of the press to place the interests of the university above its own. The university must also make certain in advance that the would-be founders of the press are men who will regard that duty as their pleasure: who will, because of this rather than because of formal agreements, respond to every matured suggestion made by the university authorities for the development of

the enterprise: and who, in establishing their organization, have no thought of financial rewards to come from it to themselves personally or to their successors. In so far as these men, or any of them, devote their entire time and thought to the work of the press, it is but right that reasonable compensation for services rendered should be included in the operating charges of the enterprise: although it is improbable that such salaries will bear comparison with the larger sums to be earned by those who interest themselves in the field of commercial publishing. But the men who contribute money for the foundation and maintenance of the press must literally contribute this, with no expectation of dividends to be returned to them. For if the organization is to be successful its purpose must be as unselfish as that of the university itself. It should not seek to make pecuniary profits for any individual,

or group, or even for the university whose name it bears. Any gains that it may derive from manufacturing, or from the publication of any given work, should be devoted to broadening its field of service in the interest of education.

Thus shorn of the possibility of financially benefiting its founders, it would seem at first sight as if the work of each university press and its development must be left to the administrative officers or to the faculty of the institution in which it operates. That this has not proved to be the case everywhere and that the reverse is proving increasingly true are doubtless due both to the fact that the business of printing and publishing is so fascinating, and to the further fact that more and more alumni delight to add to their own personal business interests some form of work for their university. In the management of a press there is presented a

most attractive field for the exercise of any talents which they may possess. If they be endowed with a fair amount of business ability, it will do much to offset inadequate capital endowment available for the press at the outset of its career. Their enthusiasm may be no greater than that which members of the faculty would bring to the task: but it is quite conceivable that the association of some members of the general body of the alumni of any university with its press may cause the enterprise to seem less academic to the remainder of the graduates than if it were managed and directed solely by professors of the institution. The choice of works for publication made by such graduate managers may possibly not always be as conservative as the selections of a faculty committee, but if faculty representatives have the power to veto the decision of the graduate managers the latter can do the university no harm by

their suggestions. They are furthermore likely to do its press much good through constantly seeking to prevent the organization's falling into the rut of issuing chiefly theses, lectures and similar local material—if it may be so described. In such works the press must naturally be interested because of its relation to the university: but because of its relation to the general public the press must be alert to the opportunity and the duty of publishing volumes by writers in other institutions and in other countries. A faculty management may recognize this as well as a graduate management. A proper combination of the two is perhaps more certain to recognize it than either one alone.

Graduate management with faculty supervision is apt to be of advantage to the university and its press in other ways. For one thing, it is far from undesirable in university publishing to have

the decision as to what works shall be published made by university representatives who are in no way concerned with the question as to how such publications are to be financed, or how profitable or unprofitable they may be. These problems are left to the graduates conducting the press and constitute the strongest reason for having associated with the enterprise men trained for business rather than for teaching or research. Such men, once enlisted in the service of the press, will bring to the work not only commercial experience, but also a certain business enthusiasm of equal value—since it will lead them to devote all their time and energy to the task of rendering an enterprise, probably doomed in advance to financial loss, as nearly self-supporting as it can be made. Once, therefore, a work has been approved for publication by the university authorities, it is almost certain that graduate managers of the business

type will secure for it wider distribution than would be possible under faculty directors or trustees. For the chief interest of the latter must be in their own field of study, rather than in the business side of the press, and they are more than likely, from the very nature of their profession, to be unaccustomed to dealing with the details of advertising, etc., necessary in any campaign of distribution. It is probable also that graduate managers will be prepared to spend more money, as well as more time, in perfecting the appearance of a given volume than would faculty trustees, who will almost inevitably be influenced in their feeling as to the initial cost of manufacturing any book by their knowledge that they themselves can do comparatively little after its publication to increase its sales. In cases where, for such reasons, university presses have been organized under graduate management, but university

control, there has merely been a recognition of the fact that no institution can fairly expect members of its faculty to do their own work and at the same time do justice to the possibilities of the press. For the development of these possibilities there is demanded the closest study and constant planning. Otherwise books may be printed but not distributed, and surely it is productive of little good to publish works of merit and allow the world to remain in ignorance of their existence: or to put them forth in such forbidding form as may repel, rather than attract, the prospective buyer should he chance upon the volumes.

If a university press is to feel free to publish works which merit its imprint, whether or not such books will return to the organization the money expended upon them, it must rely in part, at least, on income from endowment funds held by the university

for its benefit. If, on the other hand, the press is to remain always most keenly interested in increasing to the utmost the sales of its publications it is perhaps desirable that such income from general endowment should be less than the actual needs of the enterprise. For in such case the necessity before the press to make its receipts as nearly as possible equal its disbursements will prove a constant and healthy inspiration to the development of improved machinery for distribution. A form of endowment then which aids a press and yet does not tempt it to abate its zeal for making sales of its works has been sought by many interested in university presses and has led to the establishment of individual publication funds as distinct from general endowment for the press in at least one of our universities. From the income of these funds works in history or other specified subjects are published each

year by the press under a contract with the university as the trustee of a given publication fund. By the terms of this agreement the university as well as the author is entitled to the payment of royalties from all sales of works put forth with the imprint of any one such foundation: and the university is required to use its royalty payments for additional publishing, in some cases adding at least a portion of such receipts to the principal of a publication fund. It is evident that every sale made on such a basis, not only benefits the author and helps the press to meet current expenses, but also definitely increases the resources available for publication work in future. The plan is one therefore which is apt to appeal both to the university and its press, and, it may be added, to donors—since the latter must naturally be interested in seeing the usefulness of their foundations increased year by year. It seems probable that

the establishment of such foundations in our universities will increase greatly, because there are always many who prefer giving individual funds to joining in a general endowment movement. Another potent reason is that with such individual publication funds can be associated permanently the name of someone in whose honor and memory the gift has been made to the university. It would be difficult to plan any form of memorial of greater service. Side by side with the establishment of such funds should proceed, however, the gradual growth of general endowment for the press, so that if the scope of the work of any or all publication funds is limited the press may nevertheless not find its operations unduly restricted.

If in the development of this discussion more has been said of publishing than of printing, it may frankly be admitted that it is because publishing seems to the

writer more important than printing, if a choice must be made between the two. The function of a university press cannot properly be described as either printing or publishing for the benefit of its own university, however, but as something more than either of these activities, or indeed of both combined. The function of a university press in fact is nothing less than to render distinct service to the world in general, through the medium of printing or publishing or both, and in such ways to supplement the work of education which commands the devotion of the university whose name the press bears. Its mission may be fairly described as university extension work of the finest kind. It is probable that as the press grows it will reflect credit upon the university where it is located, and may even add to its renown as a seat of learning. It is practically certain that through its work the press will bring into

prominence writers whose names would otherwise have been known to but few. It is inevitable that by publishing works of instructors and assistant professors the press will aid materially in securing for them, in addition to this larger recognition, earlier promotion. These results are pleasant to contemplate, but they do not in themselves and alone justify the establishment and maintenance of a university press. Such an organization may incidentally benefit its own university, but its primary duty is to the world of scholarship and letters, and to the public at large, rather than to any single institution. It follows naturally, however, that the higher the service the press renders to the world the greater will be the benefits resulting from its operations to its own university.

It is precisely because its function is world-wide service in the cause of education that the organization of the work of a uni-

versity press is of more than local interest. We must all concern ourselves with the question of how our university presses may obtain still wider distribution of their volumes, not just among the graduates of any given institution, but very generally among our people. For if our university presses merely print meritorious works and find few readers for them, they are manifestly not accomplishing their purpose. Some of our presses are admittedly more successful than others in this respect, but no one of them can as yet point to distribution commensurate with the importance of the works bearing its imprint. The problem then is of interest to them all. More than that, its solution is of importance to our nation as a whole. It has been said that in America we have pinned our faith to popular education. Recent history has shown how willingly our people turn to those connected with our universities for help in

dealing with their difficulties and perplexities. Abroad we can see how the aspirations of a people have been guided, if not actually moulded, by the widespread diffusion of the views of certain scholars. Our American university presses have no propaganda to push, but in their lists are to be found many works which if widely read and discussed would give to our democracy the broad knowledge necessary for understanding and intelligent decision. It is not only our business as publishers to exert ourselves individually to secure wider distribution for such works, but also our duty as thinking Americans to co-operate to bring about such a result.

Why should we not then at least make a start now by having a number of our organizations form what might perhaps be called the university press association, or the united university press service? There is not time for

anyone to attempt at this meeting to go into all the details of such an alliance. One might briefly, however, point out the saving in expense to each press, combined with increase in efficiency, which would result, for example, if one representative from such an association, well known to the book trade of the country, could make several trips a year through the United States on behalf of the allied presses; instead of having each one send out its own traveler with only its own books and visiting comparatively few cities. Another possibility open to such an association would be the maintaining in such places as New York, Boston, Chicago and Philadelphia, as conditions might warrant, of a university press association bookshop, where the complete publications of each of the presses might be found, in a reading room which people would delight to frequent. Organized on proper lines such stores need not involve any of the

organizations in heavy expense. They would certainly prove a convenience to the general public of each city as well as to the book trade, and to study how to serve the convenience of the public is one of the first duties of every university press. We must not wait inactive for the public to seek us out. Rather we must go to that public and show it the value of what we have to offer.

The idea is put forward at this time not as one we should now discuss, but as one we shall later on probably wish to discuss. In it there is to be found no hint of consolidation—for each press must remain as independent as its university. There may be no immediate need for such an association but there is certainly opportunity before it. Our American university presses admittedly have much to learn from each other, but happily are none of them too old to learn. As a representative of one of the youngest I thank you for

the opportunity given me to speak on a subject very near my own heart, but in which many of the delegates here assembled might well be said to be professors, while I am but a student, though an eager one.



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